**Christianity and the Jesuits in China**

Emperors were wary of the loyalty of Tibetan Buddhists because of the threat posed to their own authority by the religious leadership of the Dalai Lama. Any alternative locus of allegiance was simply unacceptable. Their caution about Christianity derived from similar reasoning, and led them to frustrate European missionaries’ hopes of large-scale conversion. First, the initial toleration of the Kangxi Emperor (r. 1662—1722) was eroded by papal envoys’ insistence on overall papal authority over Chinese Catholics; then the Yongzheng Emperor (r. 1723—35), perspicaciously expressing apprehensions about the inevitability of warships following missionaries, banned Christianity altogether. Finally, the Qianlong Emperor followed his grandfather’s rejection of any possible competitor for the loyalty of his subjects. Although missionaries converted a few hundred thousand Chinese, for the most part they failed to persuade members of the Chinese élite that Christianity should supersede the accustomed combination of Confucianism, Buddhism and native religions. Yet European missionaries aroused too much imperial interest to be driven away altogether.

Among the various denominations operating in China from the late sixteenth century, the Society of Jesus succeeding in installing its members at court, in pursuit of their strategy of religious conversion from the top down. Equally important was the use of secular knowledge to attract interest before any question of religious conversion arose. This led Jesuits to present the emperors with such elaborate gifts as clocks and maps, to display European ingenuity, and to offer their services at court. When the Qing displaced the Ming in 1644, the missionaries transferred their allegiance to the new regime. Among many other activities, European Jesuits directed the Qing Bureau of Astronomy after bettering Muslim astronomers’ predictions of an eclipse; they supervised foundries that produced astronomical instruments (some still visible at the Observatory in Beijing) and heavy artillery (some now displayed at the Tower of London and other European museums); instructed the Kangxi Emperor in the use of a telescope; spearheaded his project to survey the whole empire; built clocks and other devices with elaborate mechanisms; built a harpsichord; monumentalized Qing imperial successes in paintings and other media; and acted as interpreters, for example in the negotiations with Russia that led to the 1689 Treaty of Nerchinsk. They also were enormously influential as conduits of information in both directions between China and Europe.

During the reigns of the Kangxi, Yongzheng and Qianlong Emperors, European painters at the Qing court mastered Chinese brush-and-ink techniques and produced a large quantity of paintings. In return, they passed on some of their own painting techniques to Chinese court artists. For in addition to the Chinese painters with official positions in the academy, a number of European artists also worked at the Qing court. These included Jesuits of the Roman Catholic Church. Well-educated, talented painters, they were appreciated by the emperors and became court painters. The best known were Giuseppe Castiglione (1688—1766), Giovanni Damasceno Salutti (1727—1781) and Giuseppe Panzi (1734—1812) from Italy; Jean-Denis Attiret (1702—1768) and Louis de Poirot (1735—1814) from France; and Ignaz Sichelbart (1708—1780) from Bohemia. The resulting fusion of Chinese and European painting styles was a key factor in defining the Qing court painting style. These European artists enjoyed good standing at court. Many of their paintings, often on a very large scale, were intended to decorate the walls of major rooms in the palace.

The vanishing-point perspective techniques used in Qing court painting are closely connected with the European priest-painters who worked at the Qing court. This form of representation had evolved as the result of the stimulus of scientific developments in Europe from the Renaissance period. Techniques which allowed very effective representation of three dimensions, as for example in the illustration of buildings, proved very attractive to the emperors. Oil paintings, which were popular in Europe, were also popular at the Qing court. At that time, oil painting was the second largest painting category after traditional Chinese painting. Not only did the Yongzheng and Qianlong Emperors allow European artists to paint in oils, but they also ordered Chinese court painters to learn oil-painting techniques from them, as is recorded in the official files of government offices.

**Picture Above**

The Pine, Hawk and Glossy Ganoderma, 1723—35, by Lang Shining (Giuseppe Castiglione). Hanging scroll, colour on silk. The Palace Museum, Beijing.

**Picture below**

The Qianlong Emperor’s Southern Inspection Tour, Scroll Twelve: Return to the Palace (detail), 1764—1770, by Xu Yang (fl.c.1750—after 1776) and assistants. Handscroll, colour on silk. The Palace Museum, Beijing.

**The Qing Dynasty**

The exhibition starts with the formal, ritual portraits of the the Kangxi, Yongzheng and Qianlong Emperors. Even though all three emperors were Manchus they are shown in these portraits wearing formal, ceremonial robes in Chinese style. The Qing Dynasty was founded by Manchus living in the North East of the Eurasian content. In the 16th and 17th centuries the Qing organised the first state north of the Great Wall and then invaded south China. Much of the early part of the Kangxi Emperor’s rule was spent in consolidating and extending his territory. The Qianlong Emperor also undertook major military expansion, north-east and north-west. Both emperors led extensive expeditions themselves. The Yongzheng Emperor by contrast centred his time on Beijing and is best known for his transformation of government practice.

The dramatic effect of these embroidered yellow robes is also seen in a surviving court robe belonging to the Kangxi Emperor. In all three portraits the Emperors are seated on dragon thrones. Such portraits were not intended as personal, intimate representations; they were undertaken, primarily, to make present the emperor when ritual offerings were made to them after death. In addition, similar formal portraits were painted on occasions of particular court significance.